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INTRODUCTION: From Palmyra to Print: The Book in South Asia

Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond

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Zadie Smith famously begins *On Beauty*, her novel of 2005, with a parody of - or at least an act of homage towards - an opening passage by E.M. Forster. To be exact, she echoes the first sentence of *Howard's End*, referring not however to "Helen's letters to her sister" but to "Jerome's e-mails to his father". When introducing the long history of textual transmission in South Asia, one is tempted to pull off an equivalent trick. Predictably enough perhaps, the Forsterian preamble one longs to re-work is that to *A Passage to India*. Here is what one might write:

"Even apart from the city of Bhubaneswar - and that is forty miles inland - the state of Orissa presents much that is extraordinary. Edged and washed by the Bay of Bengal, it spreads out like some ample sari in sun, and the satin scintillates as it glides. Its streets are colourful and democratic. Its ancient temples are legion. At Puri the bee-hive-shaped towers of the Temple of Jagannath soar irresistibly into the sky whilst, fifty miles distant, the sculptured figures round the chariot-shaped Temple of the Sun at Kornak instruct as they cavort. The chariot wheels turn in their stasis. The stonework glows like honey. The guides are as informative as they are obliging".

In a more sober vein, one might continue thus. Eight miles from the sea, along the well-worn road from Cuttack to Puri, a hillock rises above the coastal plain. On its crest are some inscriptions in the rock face, protected by wire. Written in the Brahmi script and the Prakrit tongue, they were caused to be set up there in 261 BCE by the Emperor Asoka, ruler of much of Northern India, whose conversion to Buddhism they announce. This is the oldest known writing in the sub-continent, and its sentiments are humane. Asoka had recently put down the local hereditary rulers of the region, the Kalidasas, and the scale of the slaughter had appalled him. His change of heart, his revulsion from bloodshed, are evident from these, and from texts inscribed on other

rock faces, or else on pillars he ordered to be erected across what are now India, Nepal and Afghanistan. All are idealistic in tone, and all enjoin universal tolerance.

All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men. You do not understand to what extent I desire this, and if some of you do understand, you do not understand the full extent of my desire.

You must attend to this matter. While being completely law-abiding, some people are imprisoned, treated harshly and even killed without cause so that many people suffer. Therefore your aim should be to act with impartiality. It is because of these things - envy, anger, cruelty, hate, indifference, laziness or tiredness - that such a thing does not happen. Therefore your aim should be: "May these things not be in me." And the root of this is non-anger and patience.

These texts are in many variants and they survive at several far-flung locations. One of Asoka's pillars now stands on the ridge a kilometre from the Mutiny Monument above Old Delhi, whither it was brought overland from Meerut. The writing is high up, and difficult to make out from the ground. Another inscription on granite is on display in the museum of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata. James Prinsep (1799-1840), Secretary to the Society from 1832, was the first to translate it into English, and to identify Asoka – or "Piyadeasi" (beloved by the gods) as he calls himself in all these proclamations – as its author.

Prinsep's translation and accurate attribution were, true to form in those imperial decades, heralded as discoveries. They represented, and still represent, a colonial unveiling and appropriation of a pre-colonial past. From our own perspective, the implications are challenging, though from a rather different angle. For, not simply are the sentiments of Asoka's texts such as in the early twenty-first century would put the United Nations to shame, but the ratios of period involved are such as to dwarf several of our most cherished and modish conceptions of cultural history. Consider these facts. Asoka's victory over the Kalidasas, and his inscriptions near Puri, date from 261 years before the Common Era. The age of British colonialism in India (taking the

activities of the East India Company as colonial) is usually dated from the annexation of Bengal in 1765 CE. The Independence of India and Pakistan took place in August 1947. Dividing this entire cultural time span into relevant dispensations, one arrives at the following unsurprising statistics. The pre-colonial phase lasted 1,926 years, the colonial 182. The postcolonial age has so far gone on for sixty. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, from the publication of which in 1982 some contemporary pundits (including sometimes Rushdie himself) date the inception of modern Indian literature, is a mere 25 years old. To what extent is Indian literature therefore pre-colonial? The unavoidable answer is overwhelmingly. To what extent is it colonial? The true answer is, transitionally. To what extent is it post-colonial? The proper answer is, to a very modest degree.

One could of course, if so minded, perform an equivalent arithmetic on successive technologies of textual transmission. Regarding Asoka's inscriptions as the first surviving examples of writing in India – a conclusion to which scholars now seem wedded – and estimating the inception of print from an absconded though bibliographically listed edition of Francis Xavier's *Doctrina Christa* issued by Portuguese Jesuits in Goa in 1556, the epoch of script in the subcontinent could thus be said to have lasted for 1,817 years, and the era of print for 451, a little under a quarter of that period. These are games, of course, albeit enjoyable and instructive games. They concentrate our attention on the salutary disproportions of cultural history, but they are founded on a conceptual flaw that has vitiated a great deal of global book and communication history to this very day. For all such perspectives and calculations rely on a notion of succession, even when they are not based on an even more spurious premise of evolution. *Pace* the once-fashionable school of Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong, communicative technologies just do not follow or supersede one another in this formulaic kind of a way. History, and more especially communication history, is a mesh.

To understand the deeper history of textual transmission in South Asia it is therefore necessary to supplement diachronic exercises of the sort sketched out above with a more synchronic, and ultimately a more realistic, view. How, to take one magisterial

instance, has the *Rig Vega* lived on? It is recited daily in Kerala by Namboodiri Brahmins, it exists in a welter of manuscripts, the earliest of which dates from the eleventh century CE, and it has been printed in numerous editions and redactions, in abridgement and in translation. The epic *Ramayana* likewise is hawked the length of India by itinerant folk artists who supplement their narratives with painted scrolls; manuscript redactions exist in many of the languages of India, and it has been printed dozens of times in different versions, with commentary and without. Episodes from *The Mahabharata*, the other great epic of the subcontinent, are performed in puppet shows and in local mystery plays; its diversification is attested by a bewildering number of vulgates in the separate regional tongues, each of one of which flavours it with distinctive episodes of its own; it has been standardized, with some difficulty, by an editorial team in Puna, and currently a professor and poet in Kolkata is rendering the whole thing into English, regional variants and all. It has been performed in a variety of dramatic realizations; it has been televised. The classical literature of India is thus an ongoing multi-media performance staged in every city, town and village in the land. No succession here. And emphatically no “evolution”.

Or examine the street life of Kolkata, in any period you care to mention since the construction of the Kali Ghat. For the mid-nineteenth century that office has been performed by Sumanta Banerjee in his indispensable *The Parlor and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta* (1989). You do not have to share Banerjee’s Marxist viewpoint to recognize that here is a model for the way in which book history in its broadest sense can and should be tackled. Here is culture flourishing in every medium, and at every social level: from satirical doggerels aimed at the *bhadralok* middle class, to *panchali* (rhymed devotional songs), to *malashi* (bootmen’s songs), to *biyaya* (songs to the goddess Durgah on the last day of her festival) to *jatra* (dramatic performances set to music). Add to these the circulation of cheap religious prints from the northern district of Battala (described by a snooty British resident at the time as the “Grub Street” of Bengal); the picture scrolls employed by itinerant storytellers; the pukker performances at the elite theatres- such as the Chowringhee on what is now Shakespeare Sarani, or its successor the San Souci - the growing network of libraries, the polyglossic editorial efforts of the Asiatick Society, the swotting babus of the academies with their attendant suppliers of cribs, the book stalls around College Street, the Hellenistic hobbies of the *sahibs*, the

triple-decker novel reading of the *memsahibs*, and you have a totalising scene that confounds any attempt at straight jacketing or allocation to simple phases of production. Everything and anything was going on for much of the time.

The essays in this volume, the second of a set simultaneously issued by their publishers under the joint title *Books Without Borders*, are mostly concerned with the interpenetration of communicative norms through the thickets of South Asian culture. Harish Trivedi starts us off by examining the centrality to Indian literary life of *grantha* or palm leaf manuscripts, over three million of which, many uncatalogued and unstudied, are known to languish neglected in the libraries and archives of the subcontinent. The existence of this Himalayan shelf of thought and expression is enough to place in proportion our more historically parochial concerns; it also raises the problem of how we account for the phenomenon of print in our writing up of textual histories from this prolific part of the world. Is and was print, as it is sometimes taken to be elsewhere, the decisive event that altered communicative possibilities forever? Did it represent a fundamental refashioning of art, science and society, or simply a change of medium? Anindita Ghosh takes up this thread by examining the persistence in the popular culture of urban Bengal, whether in India or in Bangladesh, of oral and scripted forms infusing memory, performance and the book. Among the most talented and far-seeing of her generation of historians, her work may be viewed as part of a current assault on the hegemony of print; it is more realistically seen as an attempt to place print culture in an authentic continuum, to understand what it has transformed and what it has not.

Turning our attention to that northwest corridor along which so much of worth has spread out across the peninsular, Kitty Scouler Datta stresses the crosscultural versatility of the *ghazal* poetic form, Persian in origin, adopted in courtly performances throughout Northern India, and in translation through the emerging hybrid of Urdu and in the English of the certain eighteenth-century orientalist. The written history of the form embraces the Persian of Hafez and the sorrowful nineteenth-century masterpieces of Bahadur Shah Zafar II, last of the Mughal emperors, calligrapher and poet. Even today ghazals are a staple of North Indian Sufi worship, and flourish simultaneously in bazaars and discos as a much-loved pop vogue. Ghazals transcend divides between oral, scripted and printed. They run across

strata of society, technology and taste, from the scholar's bookshelf to the piped background music of local eateries. It is difficult to think of another tradition that amplifies quite so impressively Ghosh's case for the intermingling of artistic forms, both across national boundaries and across generic types.

One possible way of describing the role of print in South Asian culture is that it has supplemented the presence of script; another is that it has reinforced both the presence of alternative writing systems and the ways in which they occasionally impinge on one another. Hemjyoti Mehdi offers us a shrewd case in point. Until the early nineteenth century Assamese literature was written down in the Assama script; following the intervention of American missionaries in Upper Assam, however, two developments occurred. First Assamese texts were printed in some numbers; second to facilitate this exercise Assama characters were forsaken in favour of the neighbouring Bangla system, a shift exacerbated by the influx of educated Bengalis into the local government service. The ascendancy of Bengali characters for writing has continued to this day; it amounts, she argues, to a form of sub-imperialism that has only recently been challenged. Polemically, therefore, Mehdi's contribution might seem to swim against the tide of the volume as a whole. She is evidently and passionately an Assamese cultural patriot, keen that her overlooked region of India should assert its semiotic independence. Analytically, nonetheless, her essay illustrates more poignantly than most the interaction of codes in an industrialising world, its consequences, the dilemmas in which it places peoples and languages.

From sub-imperialism we pass on to imperialism proper, to the heyday of print and to the activities of those who may be considered Lord Macaulay's proverbial children and grandchildren, or at least his successful agents. There follows a quartet of essays concerned with the role of overseas publishing firms during the Raj. Academically this is proving something of a growth area. In the wake of Rimi B. Chatterjee's recently published research into Macmillan and the Oxford University Press, we have here a couple of essays by David Finkelstein and Victoria Condie that look at the thriving Calcutta firm of Thacker and Spink. Thackers were leaders in their day; they produced books on most subjects, carrying both fiction and non-fiction lists. They were a recognized conduit for certain official publications; they took out, or rather were sold, the copyright on Kipling's apprentice work. In an incisive archive-based

piece Shaf Towheed peers into that particular authorial relationship, the fracture that it led to, the permanent distrust of publishers in general it stirred in Kiplings' mind, and the alternative arrangements he then made with the railway list of W.H. Wheeler of Allahabad, before leaving for London and a lasting, if guarded, understanding with Macmillan. Railway editions of course were far from unique to India. They had started with Routledge's Railway series in the steam-randy Britain of 1848; by the 1890s Thomas Nelson and Sons in Edinburgh were issuing their fivepenny classics in a format convenient for this mode of travel. To this very day the extensive Indian railway system has served as a valuable stimulus to literary production. But to linger over the work of now extinct firms such as Thackers and Wheelers is to enter the literary atmosphere of Victorian India: its packed stores, its heaving book marts, its enterprising street vendors. Nowadays one can glean a transient impression of this vitality by walking up Kolkata's College Street from Presidency College northwards. But one can also sense the latterday ripples of such activity around Rajiv Chowk in Delhi, a city that since the early 1970s has usurped the place in the South Asian book trade once occupied by Bombay. Robert Fraser's essay takes us back to the decades of Bombay's ascendancy by examining, through archival files on which Chatterjee was unable to draw, the fortunes of the Oxford University Press's India Branch during the dark but energising days of World War II. His lesson is one both of interdependence and autonomy, as the starvation of resources caused by that widespread distribution of trade encouraged the boys in Bombay to take the publishing initiative into their own hands.

The literary generation that emerged in the 1930s, and which used to take up such a large slice in courses on "Commonwealth Literature", was in very many ways a transitional one. They were national and international, local yet Anglophone in expression. They wrote, they published, and also like Mulk Raj Anand, the publication of whose first novel *Untouchable* is the subject of Susheila Nasta's essay here, they involved themselves in broadcasting and journalism. Nasta and Ruvani Ranasinha examine the position of such writers who found themselves talking both to and for India. The double angle is perhaps especially obvious in the work of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, ardently Bengali yet always seeming to address an audience at the other end of what he was to call the Passage to England. An awareness of addressing different arenas can be heard too in the inflections of Tambimuttu, a Sri Lankan and

founder of *Poetry London*, who for a few years before, during and after the Second World War was the darling and gadfly of the Soho pubs. Espousing yet scourging tradition, these writers were part of an international literary cosmopolis; yet they aspired via their work to a version of modernity all their own. Some of them were well on the way to becoming media stars; certainly they grew conscious of addressing a late imperial world arena, and in so doing transformed the views that outsiders took of India, as well as influencing in oblique ways the imminent approach of independence.

The apotheosis of that movement in its lurid ambiguity is the globalised and celebrity-studded school South Asian fiction that has taken the international world by storm since 1982, year of the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Who or what is speaking from this floodlit stage: the medium or the message, the publisher or the writer, the book jacket or the word? In a culminating tour-de-force Sarah Broulliette argues through the alternatives, and reaches a heartening, if to some it may seem a counterintuitive, conclusion. At the very end of the day the centripetal pressures of worldwide presentation – all that would pre-dispose or condition self-expression and imaginative ingestion – possess less potency than individual vision and choice. Even amid the madding crowd of global marketing - that unreal airport of a location which publishing cartels address and inhabit – the individual writer, like the folktale teller and the scribe, enunciates a will that is personal and elective, elusive, and in the long run free.

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The evident challenge posed by such a survey and sharing of views to historians of the book is this: how do you begin to encapsulate all of this wealth? It is a dilemma that has so far elicited varying responses from divers quarters. Specialists in South Asian languages have given us copiously annotated editions of the classics. Social historians have supplied us with a frame (to be frank, they have actually supplied us with several frames, not all of them compatible with one another). Critics have criticized. The theorists have done what they are best at: theorising. What is lacking is a total and holistic view, one that draws on all of these areas of expertise to shed light on the almost inconceivable long epic of textual transmission in South Asia.

In January 2005 in Wellington, New Zealand, and again in February 2006 on her home turf of Kolkata, Rimi Chatterjee outlined an awe-inspiring scheme to involve scholars the length and breadth of the subcontinent charting two and half thousand years of written and printed literature. The campaign is bold, and it resolves itself at first sight less into a campaign than a series of questions. How does one organize this programme of work, seeing that there is so much and so far to cover? Who should be involved? What approaches, theoretical and practical, should be entertained? How, to begin with, do you divide up a subject so vast?

The contributions to the present symposium perhaps have a tendency to suggest that geography, that most obvious of recourses, is not necessarily the best guide. A set of regional histories is unlikely to amount to a national history, and, even were such a project possible, what avails a national history of the book in India when attention is far turning elsewhere? There is also, and perhaps has always been, an implicit contradiction between an approach governed by successive pages of a political atlas and the driving force of the discipline itself. Characteristically book historians examine cultural objects rather than places: they pore over paper, ink, print, binding, book jackets, all of which may come from anywhere and everywhere. Book history is not the Olympic games, and flags look very out of place there. In the introduction to volume one of this set we suggested that paying attention to the modes of transportation that govern and facilitate the spread of books might yield some interesting insights. In South Asia especially, more enlightenment may be found by fastening of the materialities of production across the board than splitting the subject up into zones.

One matter is clear: attempts until the present have sometimes been bedevilled by misconceptions we would be better rid of. To return to a question already raised: what in this particular context has been the role of print? The inception of this technique – or rather range of techniques, since too little notice has been taken of the effects of different methods of printing – has been described as an “arrival” or an “inception”. In either case its significance has frequently been both exaggerated and transplanted in place and time. Wood block printing or xylography was invented in China in the tenth century of the common era, movable type in Korea in the twelfth. Xylography

was known in Tibet long before the Jesuits introduced hand presses to South India in the late Renaissance. Despite Marshall McLuhan, the astronomy of print does not describe an outwardly expanding galaxy, but a universe with multiple points of origin. Asia is one of its cradles.

The nineteenth century, on which a number of our essays fasten, was characterised by impetus and diversity. Beginning in Bengal – an initiative distinct from earlier and localised developments in southerly milieus such as Tranquebar – moving in a broad swathe across upper India, then down the Deccan and both coasts, print drove onwards, adapting itself as it went to varying scripts, conditions and needs. In the south it joined up with an existing industry founded by the Catholic missions to produce a vigorous regional offshoot. Meanwhile lithography – which had originated in Central Europe in the 1920s to meet the practical requirements of music publishing and book illustration – entered India, almost certainly from Central Asia where Persian printers had been quick to recognize its potential for the rapid and faithful reproduction of cursive scripts. The new technology dispensed with the need for typesetting, and the cumbersome manufacture of fonts. It enabled printers at minimal cost to write text on stone: albeit mirror-style and in wax. The significance of the resulting revolution has by and large been lost on book historians, concerned as they have been with unilinear tracks of advance. Lithography was both an innovation and a re-birth; it empowered printers to reproduce texts in multiple copies while drawing on the age-old manual dexterity of the scribe. Within a few years it facilitated a burgeoning print industry in Lucknow and Benares; almost single-handedly it inspired a surge in Urdu literature, both of reprints and of original works. The social, educational and even political repercussions of this movement are incalculable. Concentrating exclusively on lithographed reproduction, one single enterprise, the Nawal Kishore Press of Lucknow, produced many hundreds of titles in dozens of genres. Its archives have been purchased by the University of Chicago and will absorb book historians of Urdu literature in particular for years to come.

The British, who had India in their wavering grasp, surveyed this advance with a mixture of fascination and misgiving. Very little of it had been sponsored or organized by government. Private enterprise had been the engine, local capital the fuel, but beginning with the celebrated Act XXV of 1867 – the so-called Press and

Books Registration Act - some official attention was now applied to the steering. On the question as to whether this legislative measure represented a delayed reflex reaction to the Sepoy Rising, there has been some disagreement. Robert Darnton feels on the whole that it did, Priya Joshi that it did not. A realistic middle view may be reached by extending the theory put forward by Benedict Anderson in a chapter added in 1991 to his influential study *Imagined Communities* on “Census, Map, Museum”, where he remarks of such late imperial provisions that “taking together, these powerfully shaped the ways in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the notion of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry.” If to Anderson’s trinity you add a further trio – Book Registration, Gagging Order and Copyright – you begin to get a sense of the broad front along which the Crown Colony newly established after 1858 consolidated its gowing control. Homosexuality, for example, was outlawed in India during the very same decade, two decades before legislation in Britain. There has been a tendency of late years to play down the consequences of the 1867 Registration act and to sideline its motives and effect. It is, however, far easier to discount it in this way than to undertake painstaking research into the contents of the massively informative registers and reports to which it gave rise. The annual centrally prepared reports, for example, afford us invaluable information over many decades as to the balance maintained in different locales between different genres and languages. The more detailed registers maintained in every Presidency on a quarterly basis yield in addition insights into the identities of publishers, and into print-runs, formats, price and methods of reproduction. The quarterly digests of the contents of the vernacular press are another largely unexplored mine. On this mass of data, out of which an empirically honest survey of print culture in India through the late imperial period could with necessary effort be built, work on an sufficiently extensive scale has hardly yet begun.

For better or for worse, South Asian literature is now international news. Bangalore, Kolkata’s Salt Lake City and the sprouting New Delhi suburb of Gurgaon are currently centres of communication rivalling any in the world. Indian literature has made the headlines: it features spectacularly on Booker Prize short lists; its practitioners, whether out of notoriety or fame, have become household names, even in a blasé Europe. What connections if any do these recent developments possess to the deeper history and meaning of book culture in South Asia? In the essays contained

in this volume we have, we are bold to claim, traced the outlines of certain continuities that will need to be taken into account as we grope towards an answer. To cut so broad a sweep across the face of one of the most productive regions of textual reproduction in the world may seem so courageous as to amount to mere foolhardiness. Never fear. To view the whole picture in one staggered aerial view may help us to make out the peaks and troughs. We require a broad vision of South Asian communications history to enable us to find our bearings once on the ground. As Piyadasi himself might have put it, “You must attend to this matter.”